Seirei no Moribito

by Uehashi Nahoko, Futatsugi Saki, & Fujiwara Kamui

Chapter 3

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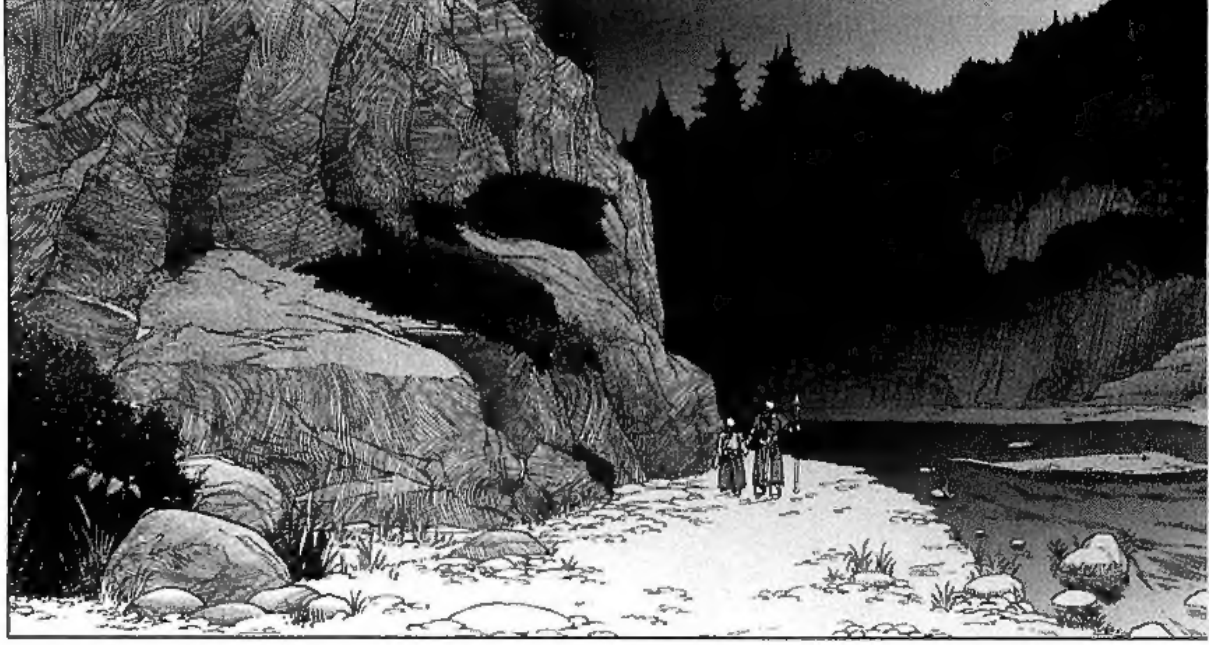
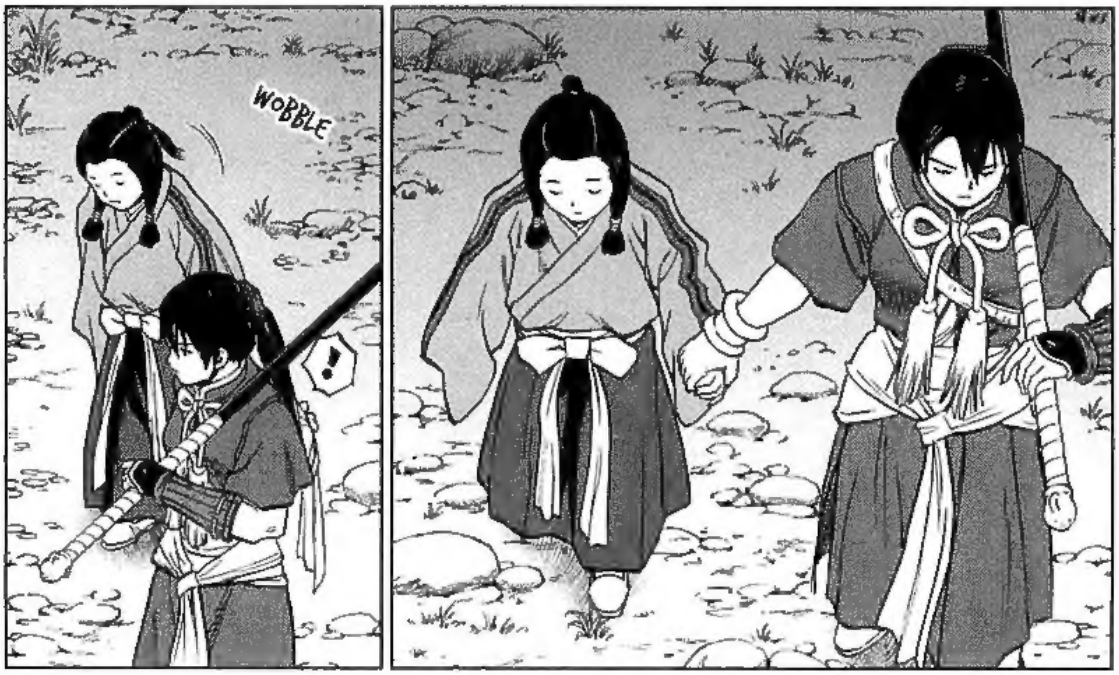
CHAPTER 3: AN APPROACHING DANGER




WOBBLE

WALKING HALF-ASLEEP, HUH...

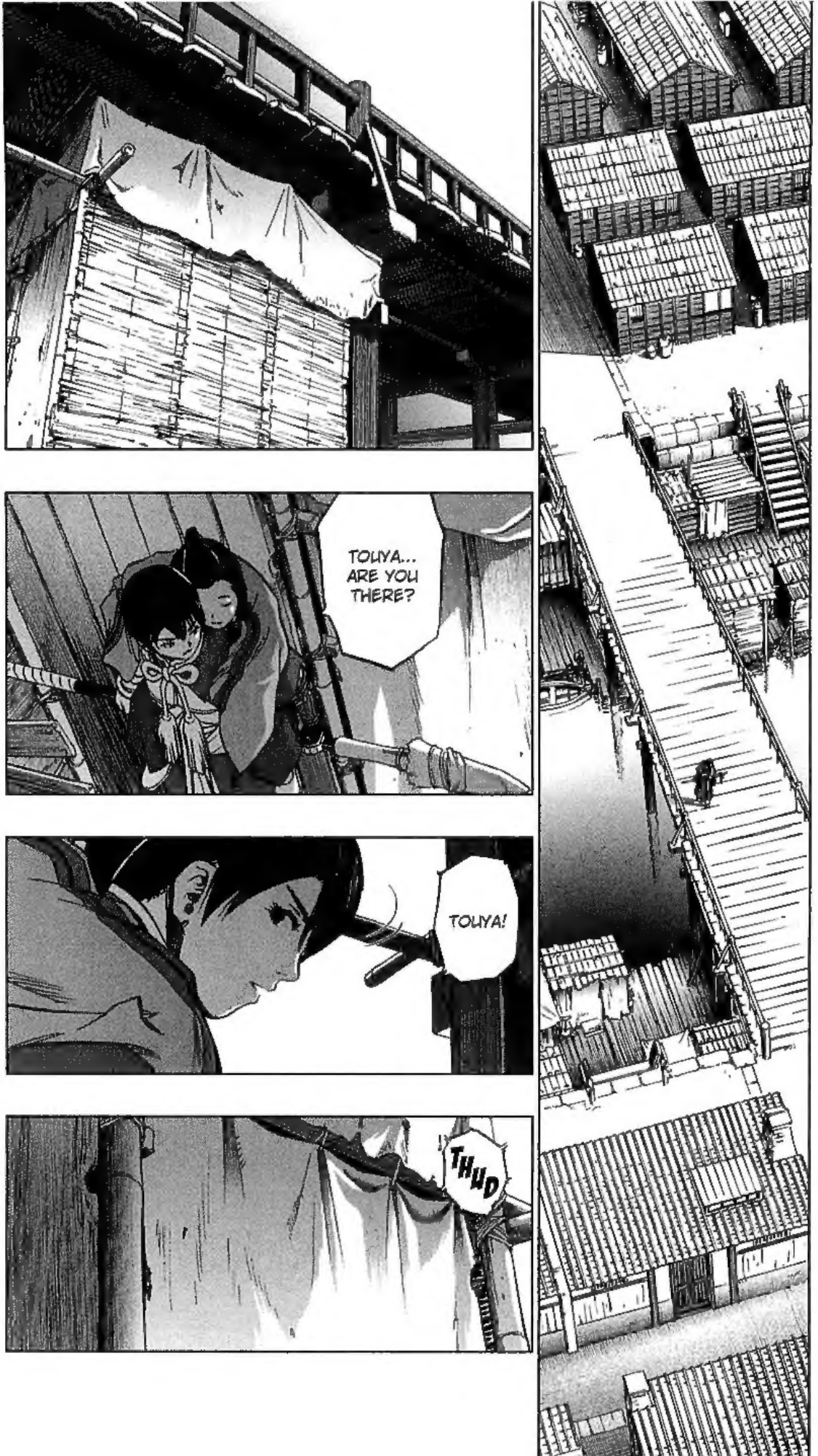
COME ON, GO PIGGY-BACK.
.....

WHAT'S WRONG? HOP ON, QUICK.
WHAT IS PIGGY... BACK?

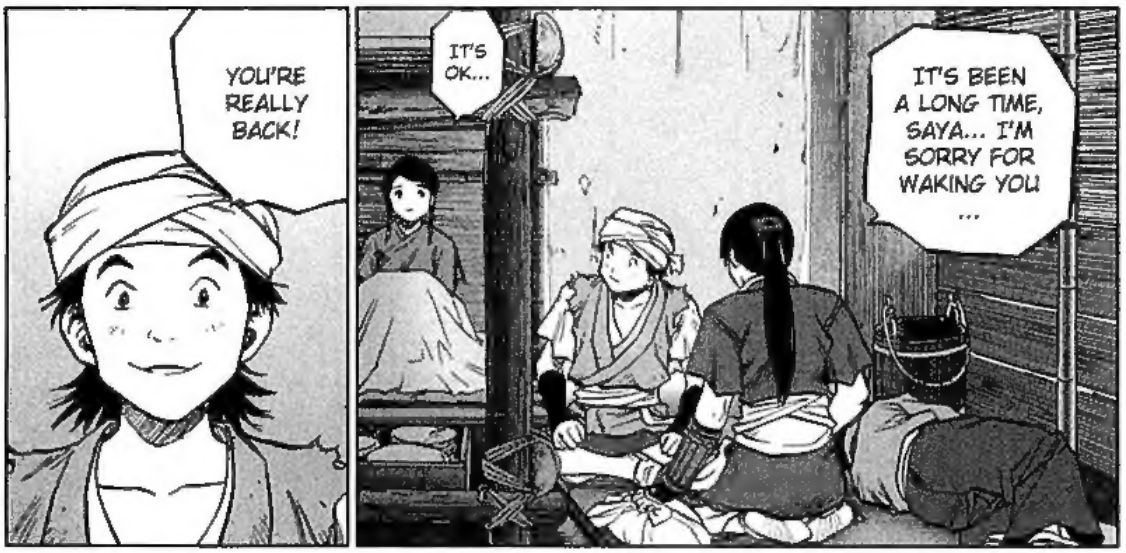
THAT'S WHAT COMMONERS DO. MOTHERS CARRY THEIR CHILDREN ON THEIR BACK WHILE THEY WORK...
IT'S WARMER, ISN'T IT? NOW GO TO SLEEP.

IT MEANS I'LL CARRY YOU ON MY BACK.

WHOOSH


TOUYA... ARE YOU THERE?
TOUYA!
THUD

WHO'S THERE? THIS EARLY IN THE MORN-ING...
AH... BALSA-NEESAN.
WHEN DID YA GET BACK?
CAN I COME IN? SOMETHING'S COME UP.
I DON'T WANT US TO BE SEEN...
OH, OF COURSE.
I'M SORRY ABOUT THIS.
BALSA-SAN...


YOU'RE REALLY BACK!
IT'S OK...
IT'S BEEN A LONG TIME, SAYA... I'M SORRY FOR WAKING YOU ...

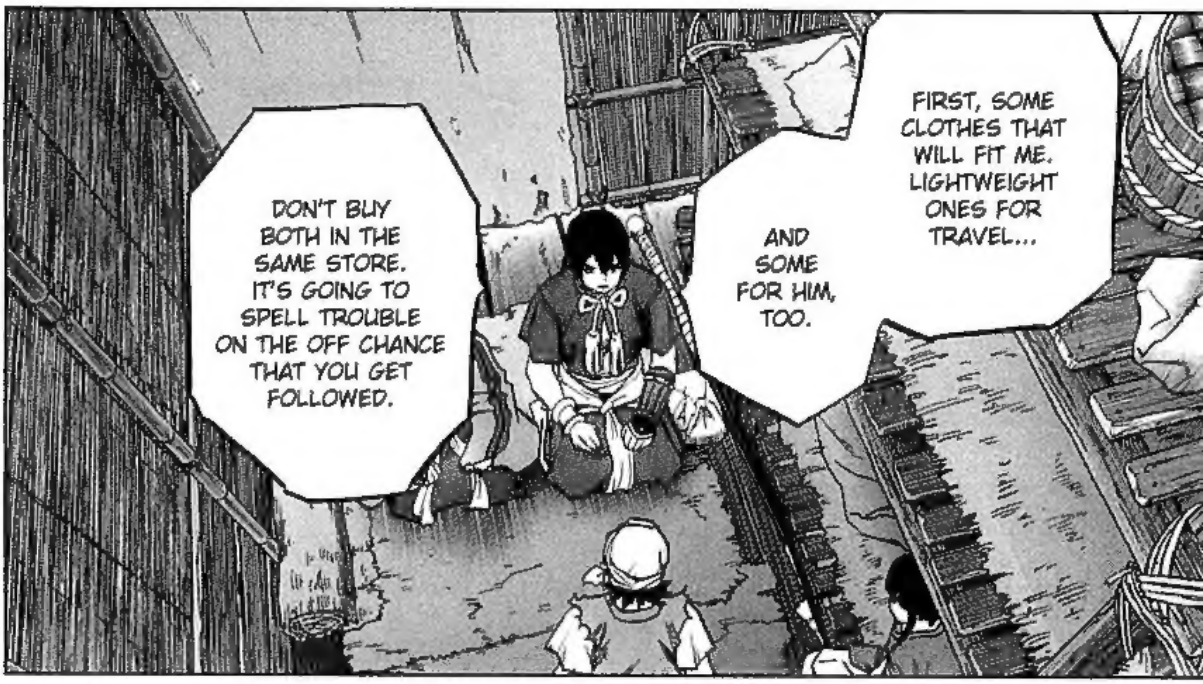
HEHE, IT'S ALL THANKS TO YOU, BALSA-SAN!
IT'S BEEN TWO YEARS... YOU'VE REALLY GROWN, BOTH OF YOU...

WHERE ARE WE?
ARE YOU GETTING UP?

NAH...

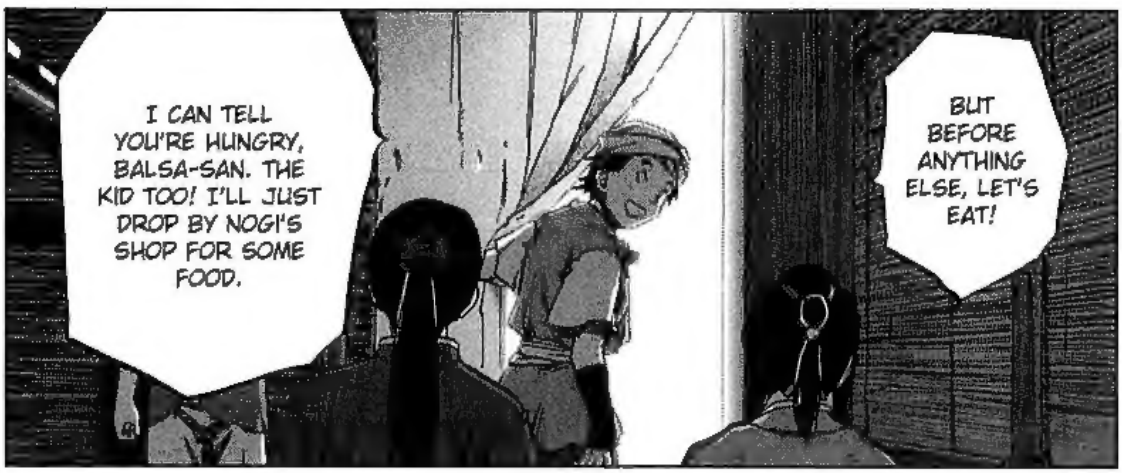
I CAN'T GET INTO THE DETAILS... IT'S VERY COMPLICATED...
UM, BALSA-SAN... WHEN YOU SAID SOMETHING'S COME UP... DID YOU MEAN KIDNAPPING AN ARISTOCRAT'S SON?
I WAS JUST ASKED TO BE HIS BODYGUARD.
OF COURSE NOT!
DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT! I'LL GO THROUGH FIRE AND WATER IF YOU'RE THE ONE ASKING, BALSA-SAN!
I DON'T WANT TO CAUSE YOU TROUBLE, BUT IT'S A MATTER OF LIFE AND DEATH...
CLINK
THIS IS SUDDEN, BUT,

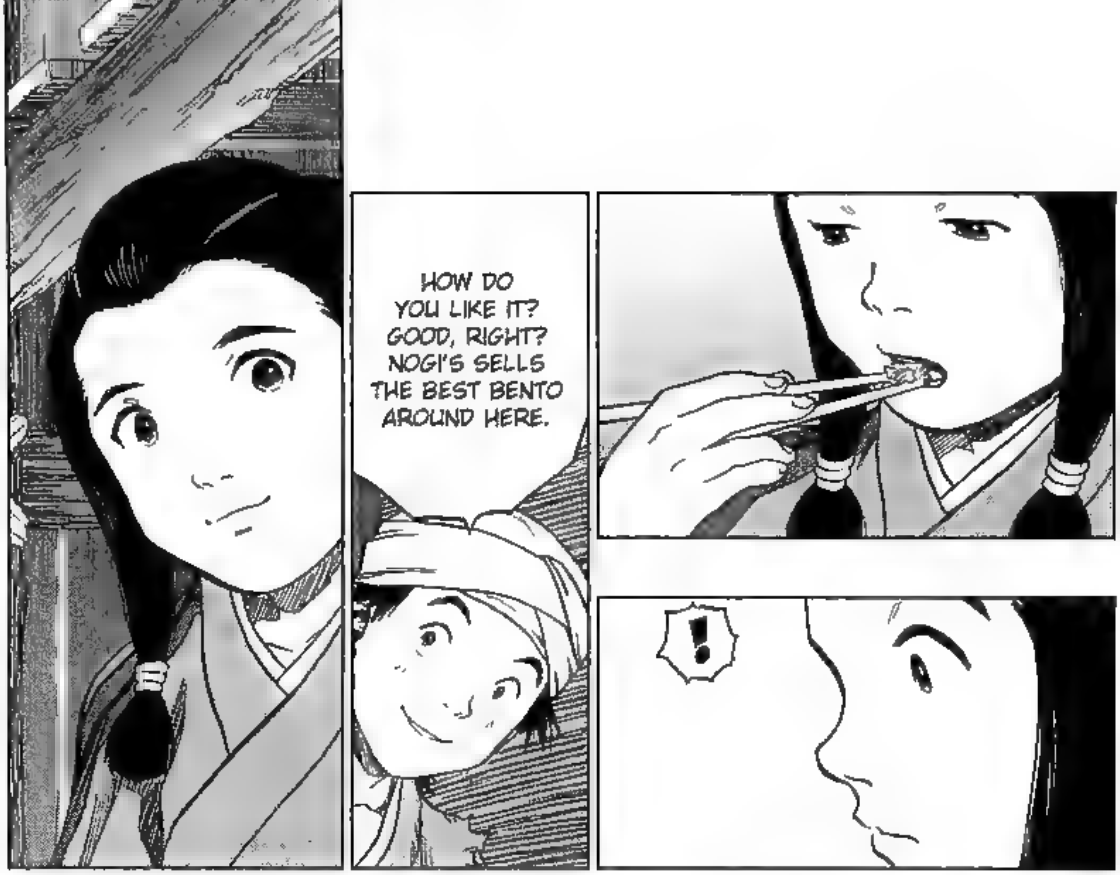
GULP
I WANT YOU TO DO SOME SHOPPING FOR ME WITH THIS.

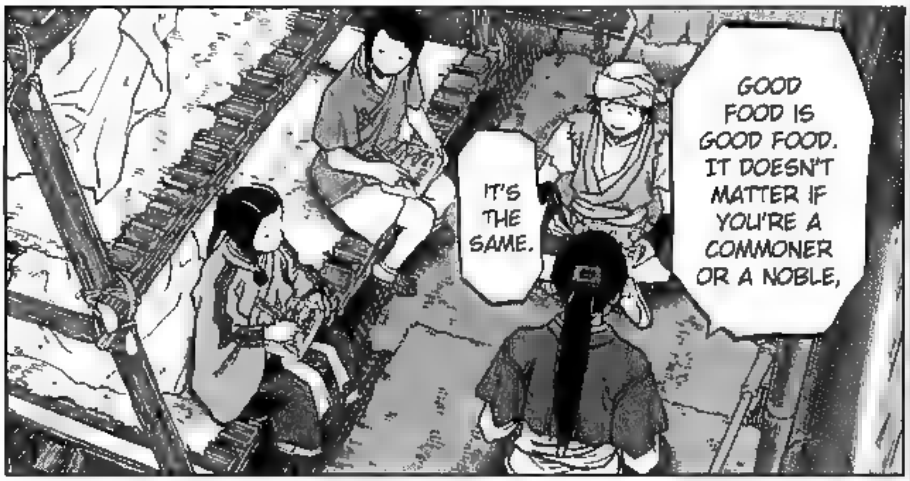

DON'T BUY BOTH IN THE SAME STORE. IT'S GOING TO SPELL TROUBLE ON THE OFF CHANCE THAT YOU GET FOLLOWED.
FIRST, SOME CLOTHES THAT WILL FIT ME. LIGHTWEIGHT ONES FOR TRAVEL...
AND SOME FOR HIM, TOO.

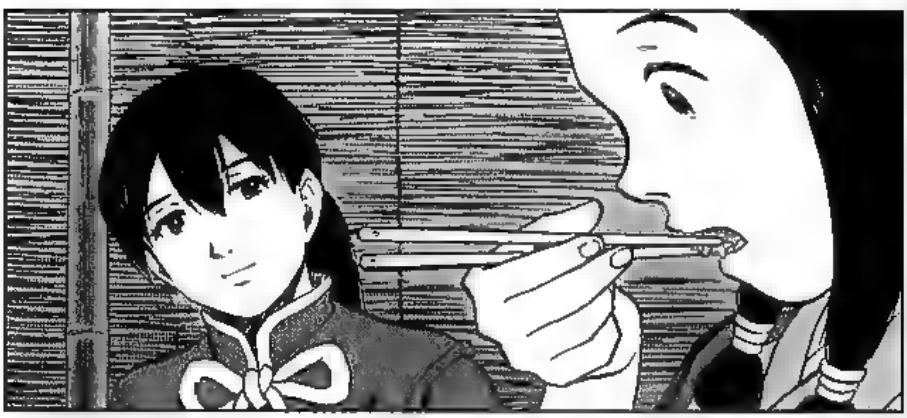
THEN 10 SHEETS OF OILED PAPER, A PIECE OF BEARSKIN, AND 10 DAYS WORTH OF DRIED RICE AND DRIED MEAT.....

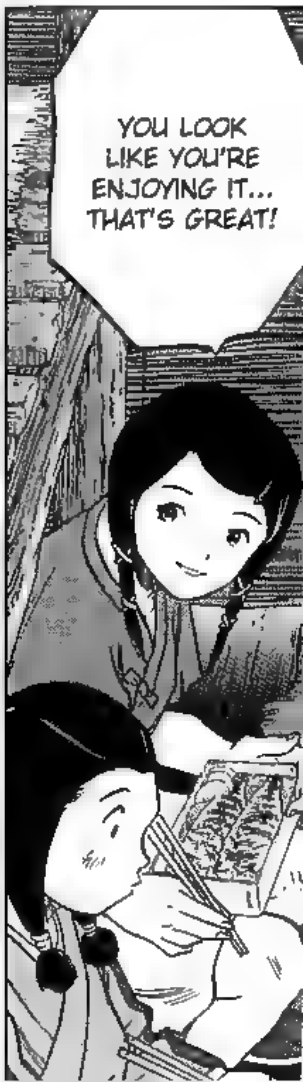
I'M GONNA NEED YOUR HELP TODAY TOO, SAYA.
NO PROBLEM! I'LL BE ON THE LOOKOUT TO MAKE SURE I'M NOT FOLLOWED.


I CAN TELL YOU'RE HUNGRY, BALSA-SAN. THE KID TOO! I'LL JUST DROP BY NOGI'S SHOP FOR SOME FOOD.
BUT BEFORE ANYTHING ELSE, LET'S EAT!

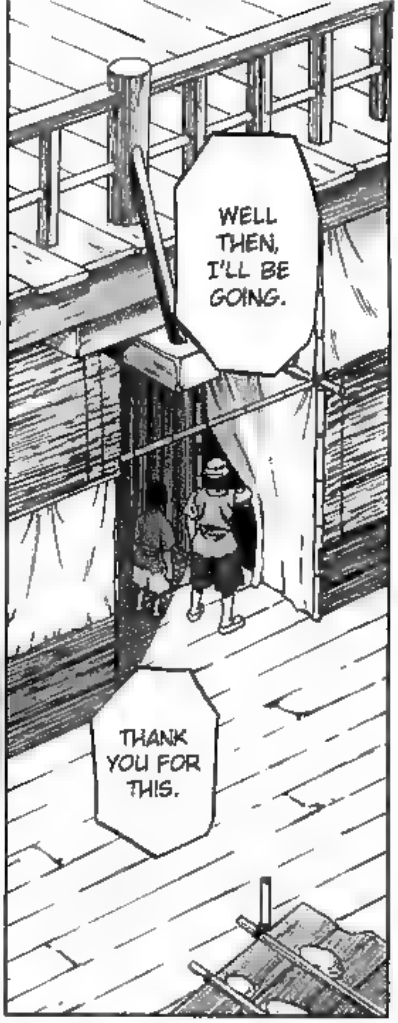

HOW DO YOU LIKE IT? GOOD, RIGHT? NOGI'S SELLS THE BEST BENTO AROUND HERE.
!

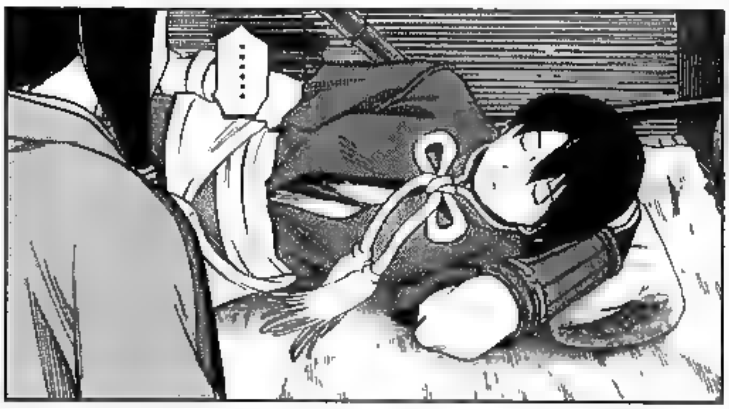

IT'S THE SAME.
GOOD FOOD IS GOOD FOOD. IT DOESN'T MATTER IF YOU'RE A COMMONER OR A NOBLE,



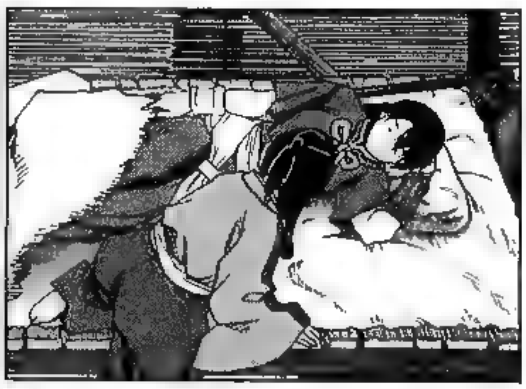

YOU LOOK LIKE YOU'RE ENJOYING IT... THAT'S GREAT!

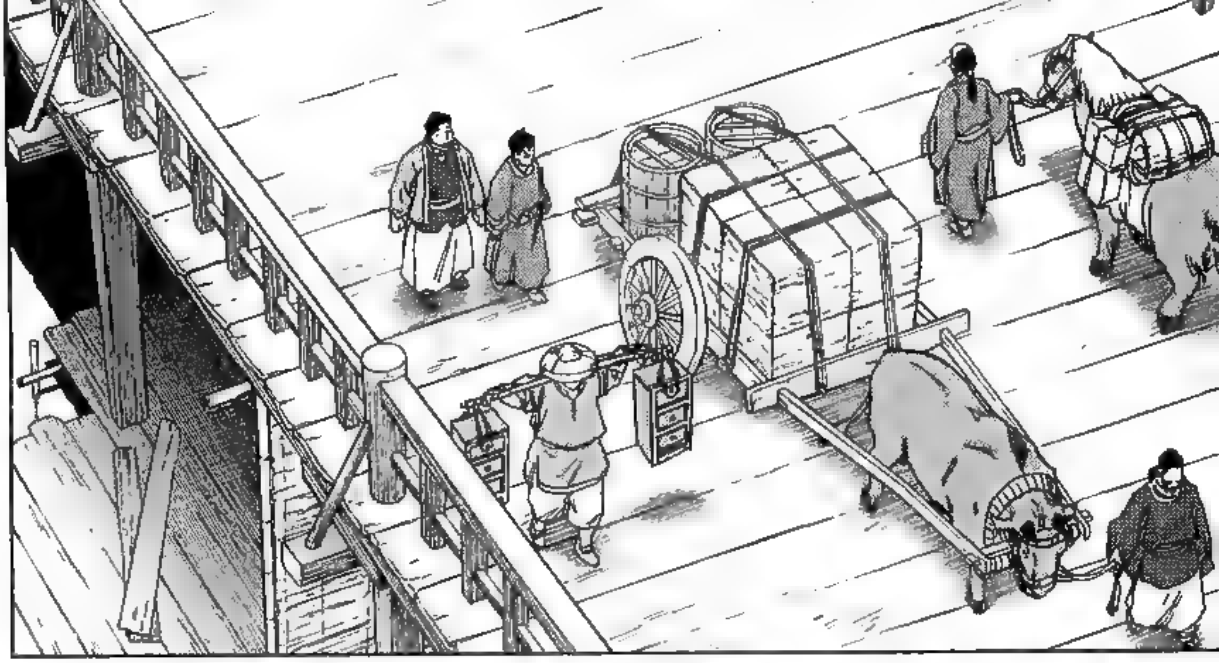
OKAY THEN, LET'S TAKE A QUICK NAP WHILE THEY'RE OUT.


WELL THEN, I'LL BE GOING.
THANK YOU FOR THIS.


.....

CLOP
CLOP
CLOP
RUMBLE
RUMBLE





RUMBLE
RUMBLE
THUMP
THUMP
THUMP

CLACK
CLACK
RUMBLE
RUMBLE
RUMBLE

FWIP

WHAT IS THIS... AND WHAT IS THAT SMELL...

CHAGUM!!
CHAGUM!!

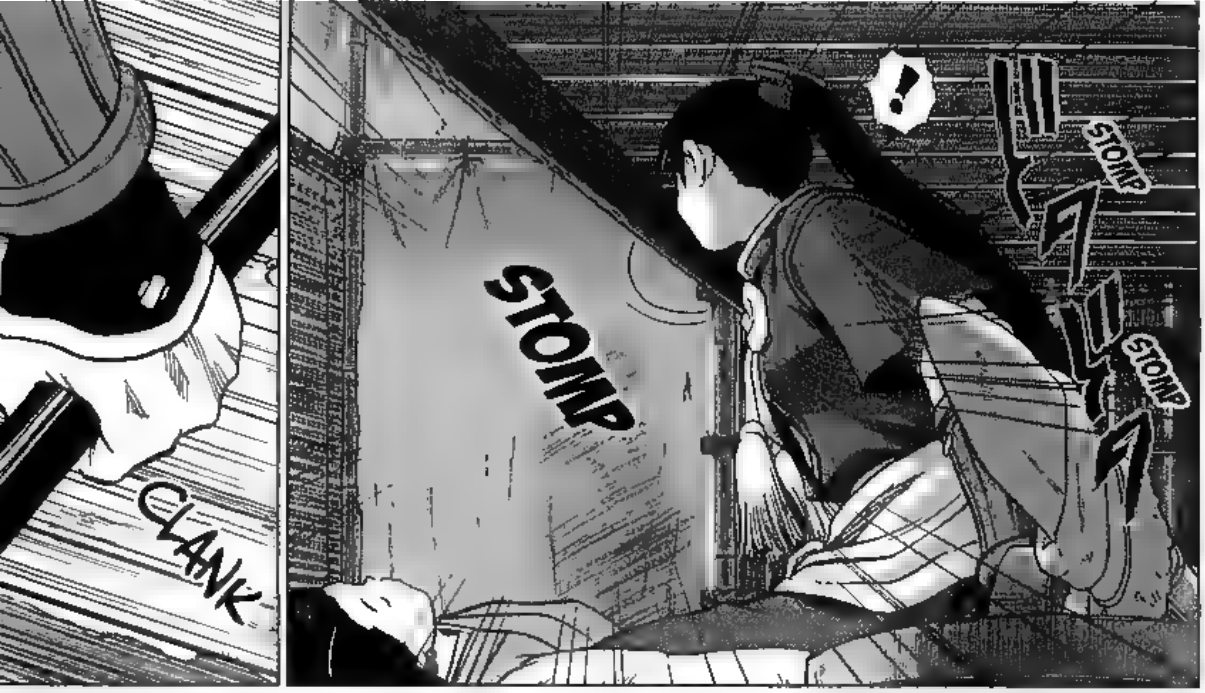
ARE YOU ALRIGHT?
AAAH...

I CAN'T REMEMBER... BUT I THINK IT WAS THE SAME DREAM I ALWAYS HAVE...
A DREAM? WHAT DID YOU SEE?
I HAD A DREAM...

WHEN I REALLY THINK ABOUT WANTING TO GO BACK...
THE SAME DREAM?

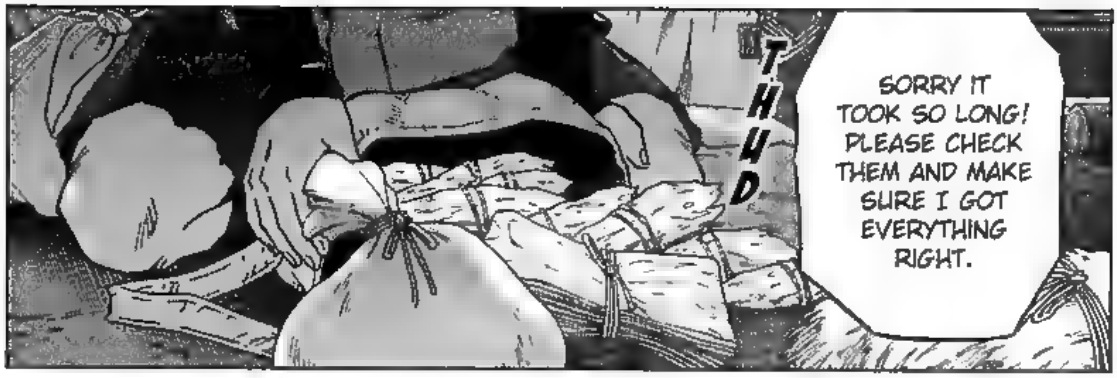
NO...
TO SOME COLD, BLUE PLACE...
GO BACK? YOU MEAN TO YOUR MOTHER?

BUT IT'S NOT JUST ANY WATER... IT'S... IT'S WATER FROM SOMEWHERE SPECIFIC...
!
RIGHT.. THAT SMELL JUST NOW WAS THE SMELL OF WATER. .

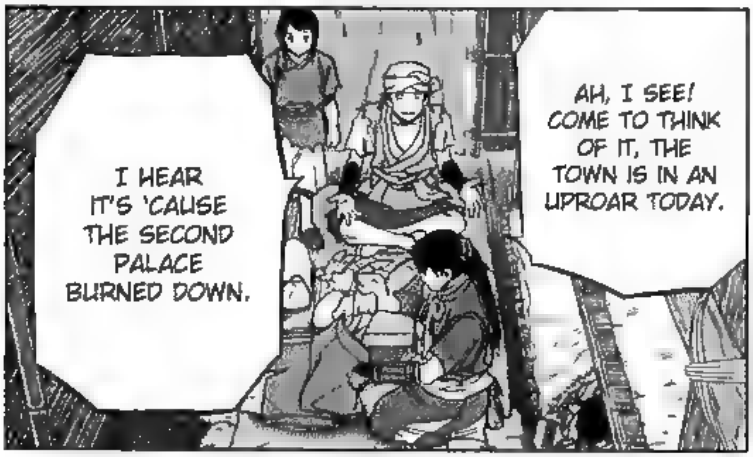

CLANK
STOMP
!
STOMP
STOMP

FLAP
WE'RE BACK!!

AH!


THUD
SORRY IT TOOK SO LONG! PLEASE CHECK THEM AND MAKE SURE I GOT EVERYTHING RIGHT.

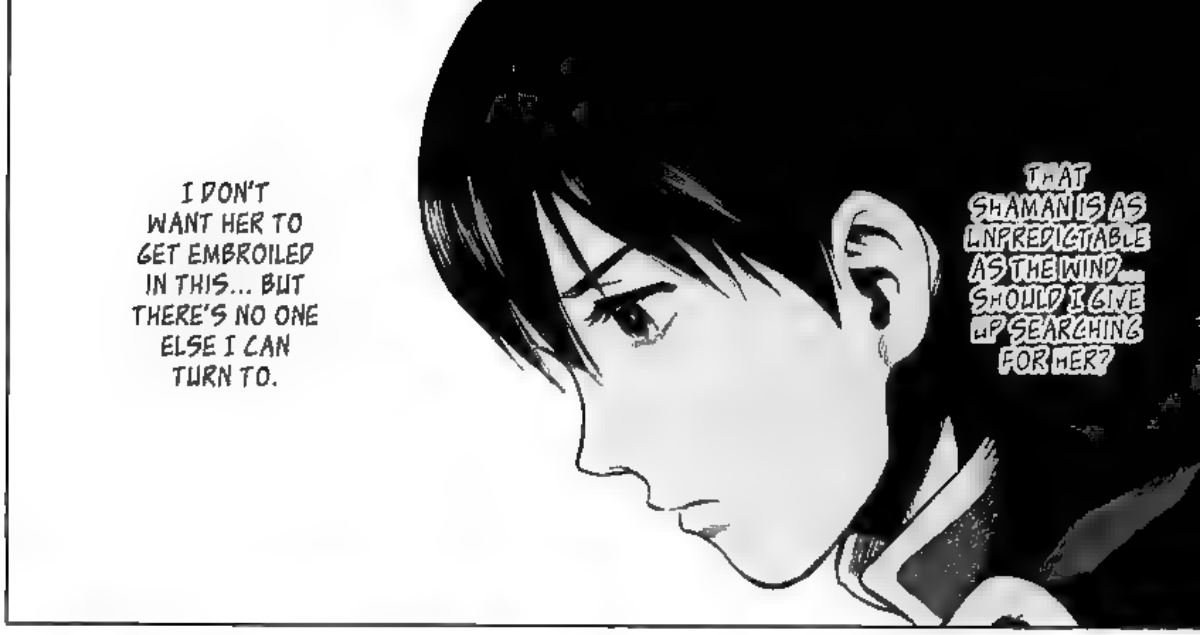
WHAT'S WRONG, BALSA-NEESAN? YOU LOOK PALE.
AH... SURE.


I HEAR IT'S 'CAUSE THE SECOND PALACE BURNED DOWN.
AH, I SEE! COME TO THINK OF IT, THE TOWN IS IN AN UPROAR TODAY.

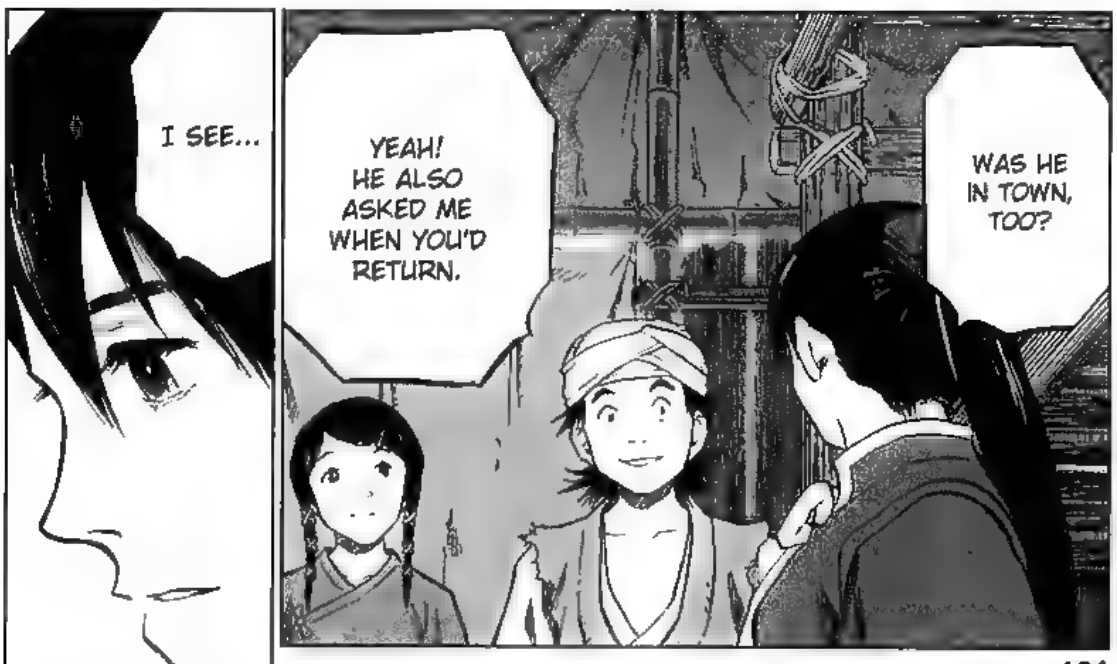
AH... NO, IT'S NOTHING. I THOUGHT YOU WERE THE PURSUERS...

NO, NOT REALLY.
DID YOU SEE ANY SOLDIERS OR BUREAU-CRATS WHO LOOKED LIKE THEY WERE SEARCHING FOR SOME-THING?

NOD
RIGHT, SAYA?
JUST TO BE SURE, I HAD SAYA BE ON THE LOOKOUT AT THE EMBANKMENT TO CHECK IF THERE WERE PEOPLE WATCHING OR FOLLOWING US. IT DOESN'T LOOK LIKE THERE'S ANYONE THERE.
I SEE. THANK YOU. YOUR QUICK THINKING IS A BIG HELP.
HMM..... I HEARD RUMORS A WHILE AGO THAT SHE WAS AROUND TOWN, BUT SINCE THEN I HAVEN'T HEARD ANY NEWS...
DO YOU KNOW WHERE TOROGAI IS, BY THE WAY?
I SEE... IT'S UNAVOIDABLE, DON'T WORRY ABOUT IT.


I DON'T WANT HER TO GET EMBROILED IN THIS... BUT THERE'S NO ONE ELSE I CAN TURN TO.
THAT SHAMAN IS AS UNPREDICTABLE AS THE WIND... SHOULD I GIVE UP SEARCHING FOR HER?

OH, I WAS JUST THINKING ABOUT HIM...
!
BY THE WAY, TANDA-SAN WAS HERE RECENTLY, TOO!

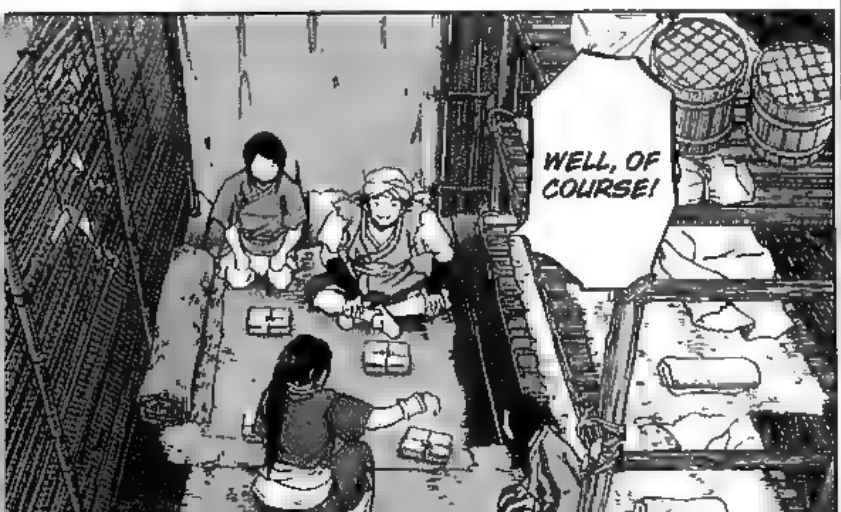

I SEE...
YEAH! HE ALSO ASKED ME WHEN YOU'D RETURN.
WAS HE IN TOWN, TOO?

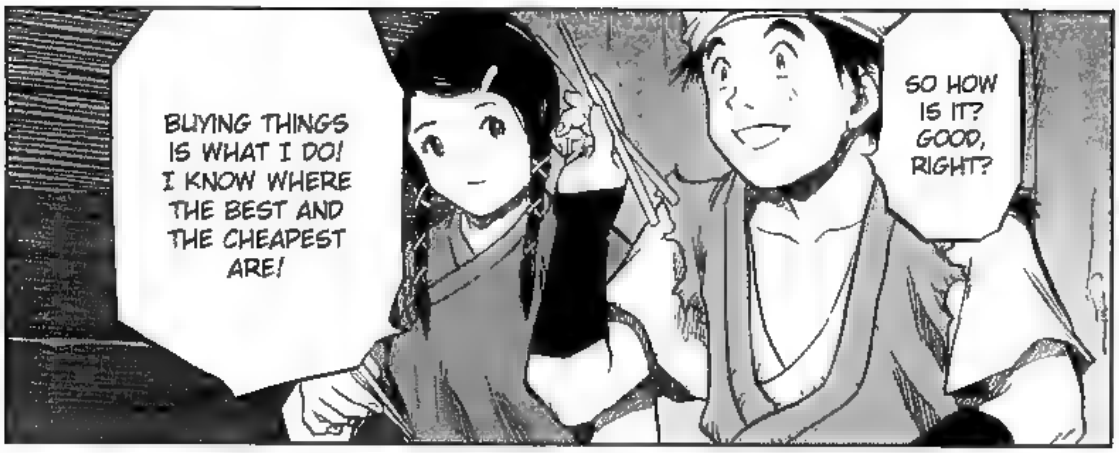
YEAH..... BUT HE'S WORRIED ABOUT YOU.
SO, IS TANDA DOING WELL...?

I SEE...

YEAH... IT'S WAY PAST LUNCHTIME... I'M HUNGRY EVEN THOUGH I DIDN'T EVEN DO ANYTHING TODAY.

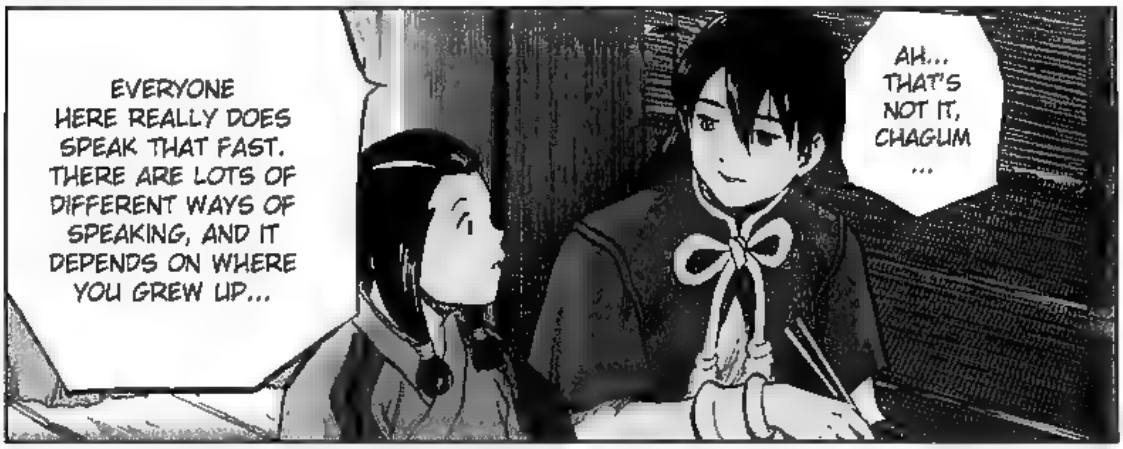
AH, AND I GOT US LUNCH, TOO! LET'S EAT BEFORE IT GETS COLD!


WELL, OF COURSE!


BUYING THINGS IS WHAT I DO! I KNOW WHERE THE BEST AND THE CHEAPEST ARE!
SO HOW IS IT? GOOD, RIGHT?

!
SO I WAS ABLE TO USE THE REMAINING MONEY TO BUY A BUNCH OF GOOD FOOD!
I'M PRETTY SURE I WAS ABLE TO GET A BETTER DEAL THAN MOST PEOPLE!!

...WHY ARE YOU TALKING SO FAST?
WHAT, IS THERE SOMETHING ON MY FACE?
I'M TALKING FAST?


EVERYONE HERE REALLY DOES SPEAK THAT FAST. THERE ARE LOTS OF DIFFERENT WAYS OF SPEAKING, AND IT DEPENDS ON WHERE YOU GREW UP...
AH... THAT'S NOT IT, CHAGUM ...

FARMERS SPEAK IN A MUMBLING MONOTONE...
TRADES-PEOPLE SPEAK SMOOTH AND FAST...

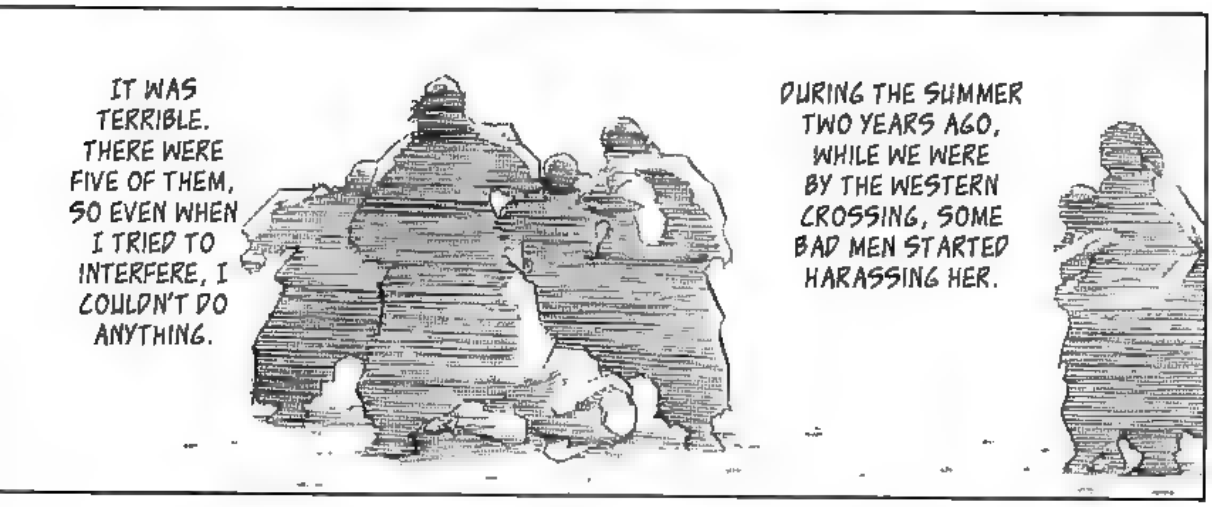
DO YOU KNOW? ME AND SAYA OWE OUR LIVES TO BALSA-SAN.
.....
AND IF YOU GO TO THE SEA, YOU'D FIND THAT SAILORS TALK VERY LOUDLY...
YOU WON'T FIND ANYONE ELSE WHO KNOWS SO MUCH. AND STRONG, TOO...
BALSA HAS TRAVELED EVERYWHERE.

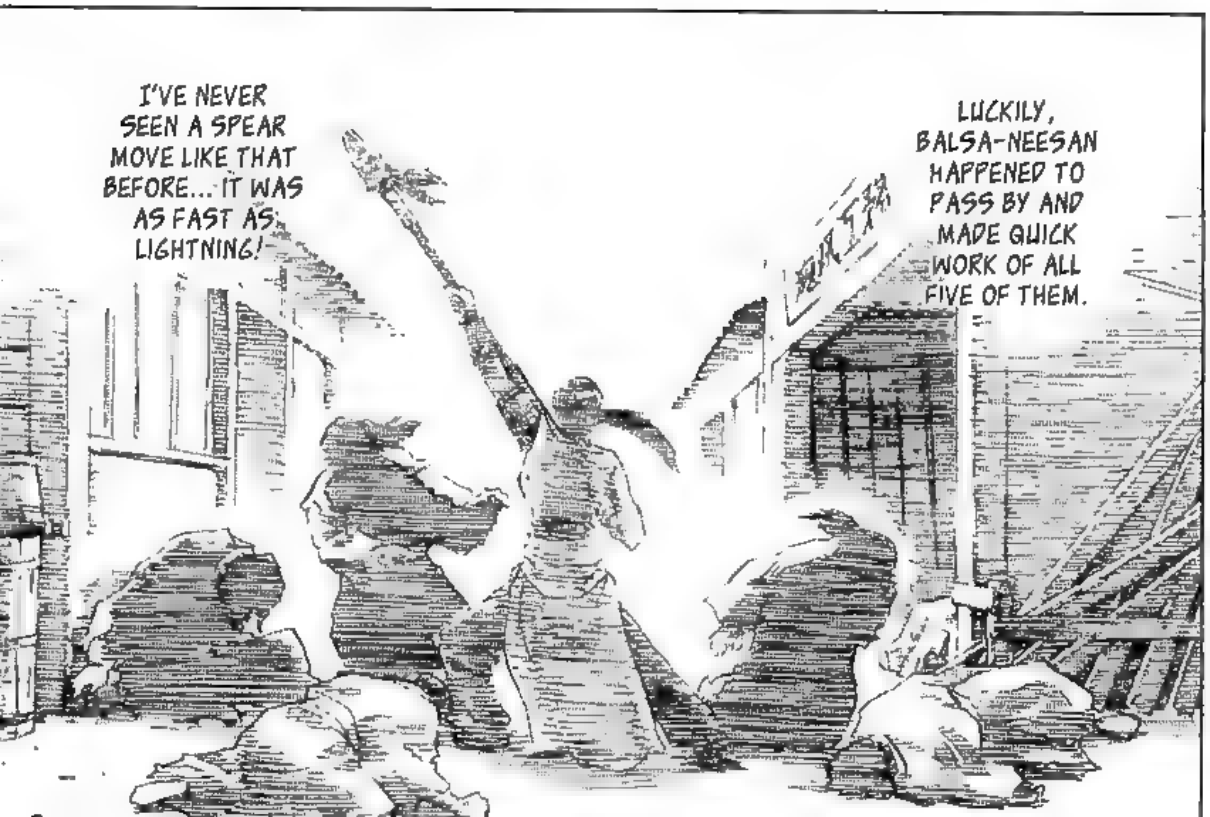
OOPS... I'LL LOWER MY VOICE, THEN...
THAT'S ENOUGH, TOUYA. AND PLEASE STOP SAYING MY NAME OUT LOUD SO MUCH...

SO ANYWAY, ME AND SAYA ARE ORPHANS. OUR PARENTS ABANDONED US HERE WHEN WE WERE TOO YOUNG TO EVEN REMEMBER THEIR FACES.

THE MERCHANTS HERE ARE PRETTY RICH, SO WE WOULD ASK FOR THEIR LEFTOVERS. AND, WELL... SOMETIMES I'D STEAL STUFF TOO, TO SURVIVE. IT'S THE SAME FOR SAYA, TOO... SO I'VE ALWAYS THOUGHT OF HER AS MY SISTER AS WE LIVED TOGETHER.

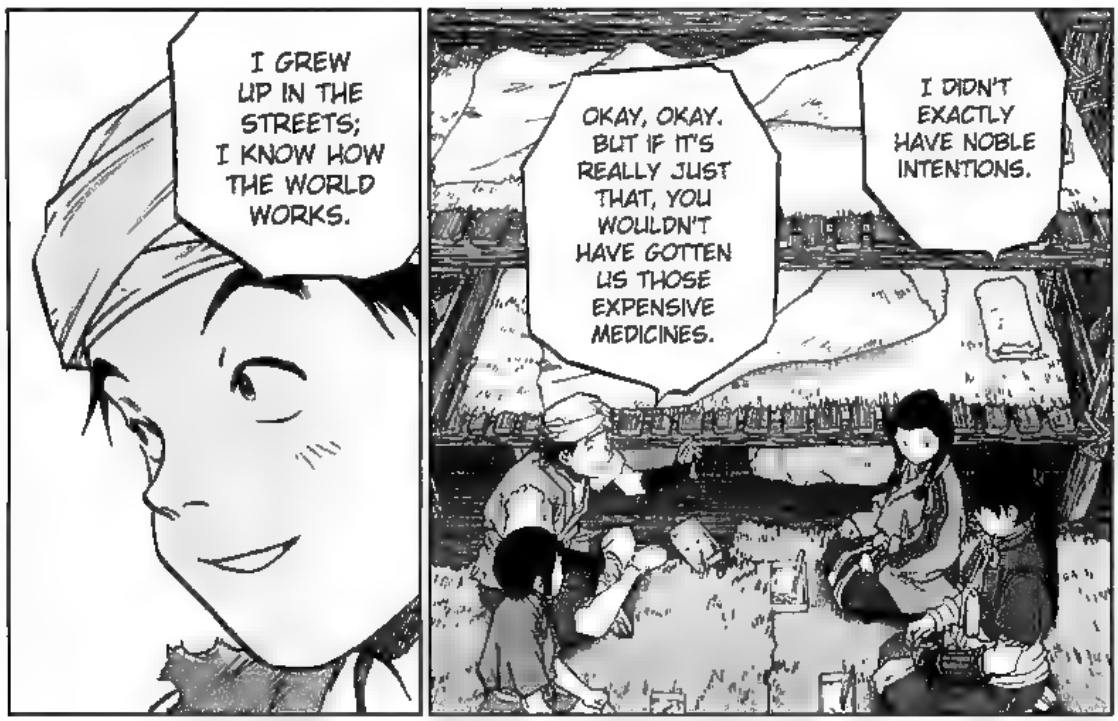
BUT, WELL, LOOK AT HOW SAYA'S FACE IS RIGHT NOW.


IT WAS TERRIBLE. THERE WERE FIVE OF THEM, SO EVEN WHEN I TRIED TO INTERFERE, I COULDN'T DO ANYTHING.
DURING THE SUMMER TWO YEARS AGO, WHILE WE WERE BY THE WESTERN CROSSING, SOME BAD MEN STARTED HARASSING HER.


I'VE NEVER SEEN A SPEAR MOVE LIKE THAT BEFORE... IT WAS AS FAST AS LIGHTNING!
LUCKILY, BALSA-NEESAN HAPPENED TO PASS BY AND MADE QUICK WORK OF ALL FIVE OF THEM.

BUT BALSA-NEESAN SAVED US WITHOUT ASKING FOR ANYTHING IN RETURN.
SO THEN... WE WERE SAVED. I NEVER THOUGHT ANYONE WOULD EVER HELP SOME POOR ERRAND KIDS LIKE US...

I TOLD YOU, DIDN'T I? BACK THEN I WAS NEW IN TOWN, WITH A NEW JOB. I WANTED TO MAKE A NAME FOR MYSELF, TO SHOW MY SKILLS.....
YOU'RE EXAGGER-ATING.

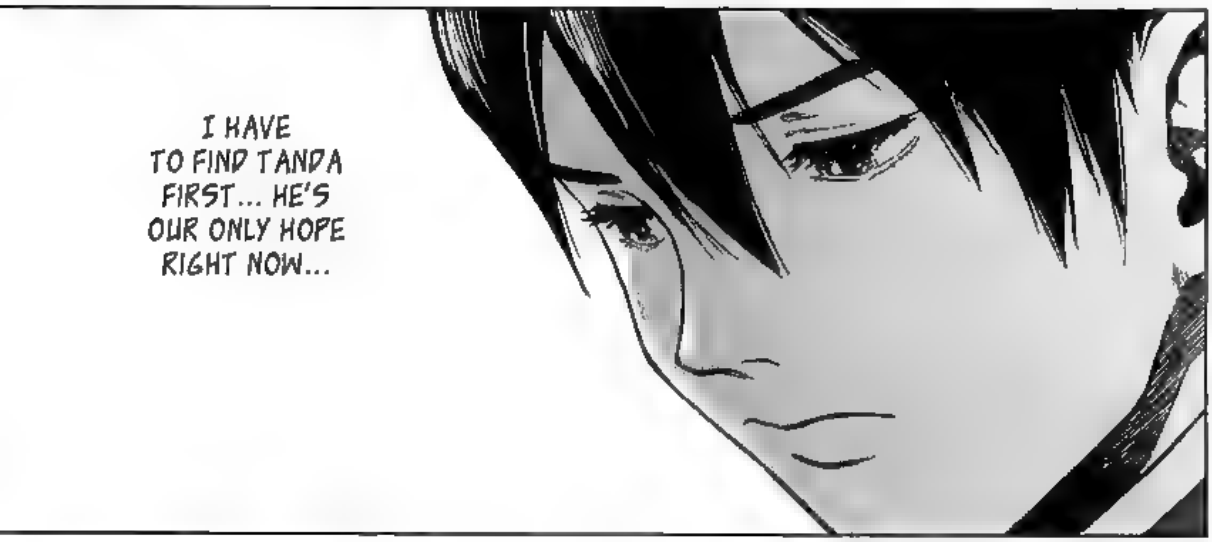

I GREW UP IN THE STREETS; I KNOW HOW THE WORLD WORKS.
OKAY, OKAY. BUT IF IT'S REALLY JUST THAT, YOU WOULDN'T HAVE GOTTEN US THOSE EXPENSIVE MEDICINES.
I DIDN'T EXACTLY HAVE NOBLE INTENTIONS.

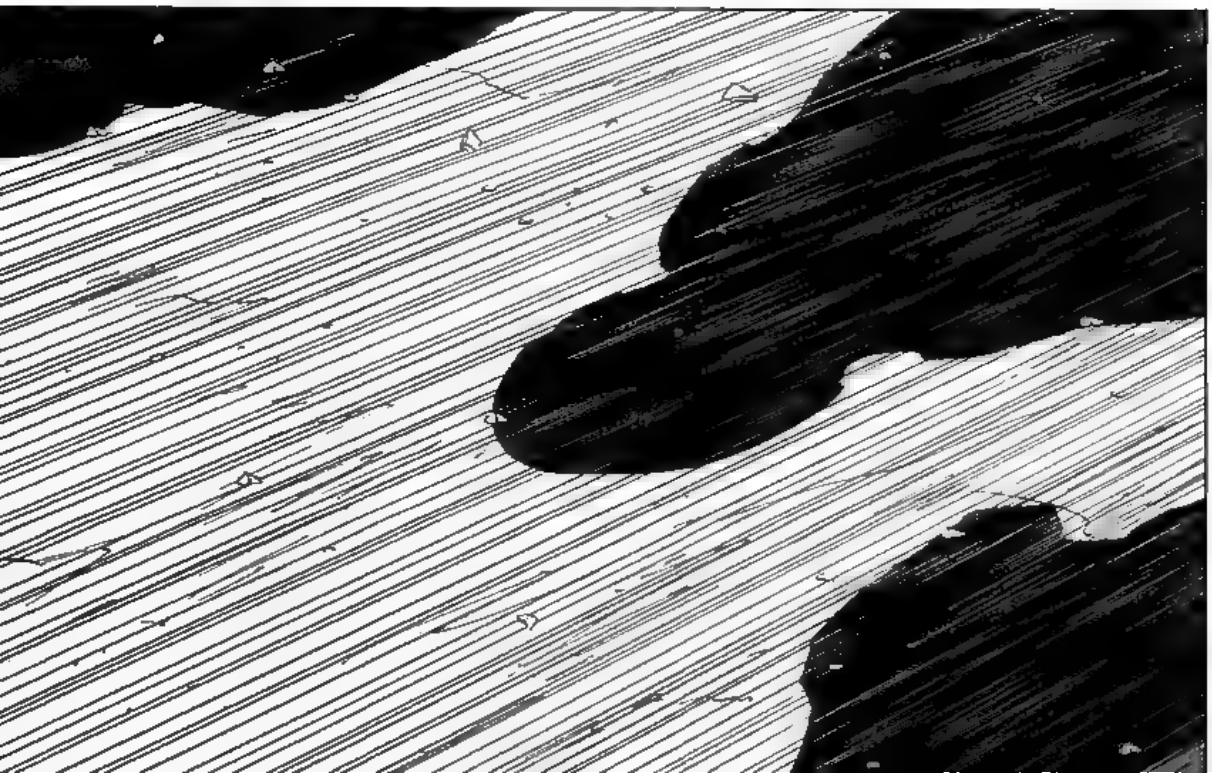
...
THAT'S RIGHT
BUT PEOPLE WHO HELP OUT WITHOUT EXPECTING ANYTHING IN RETURN ARE THE ONES WITH GOOD HEARTS.
PEOPLE WHO AREN'T KIND BY NATURE WOULDN'T HAVE DONE ANYTHING.
BALSA-NEESAN MIGHT LOOK INTIMIDATING... BUT SHE'S A KIND PERSON. SHE WOULDN'T HAVE SAVED US OTHERWISE.
THANKS..... BUT I STILL THINK YOU'RE OVERSTATING IT...
.....

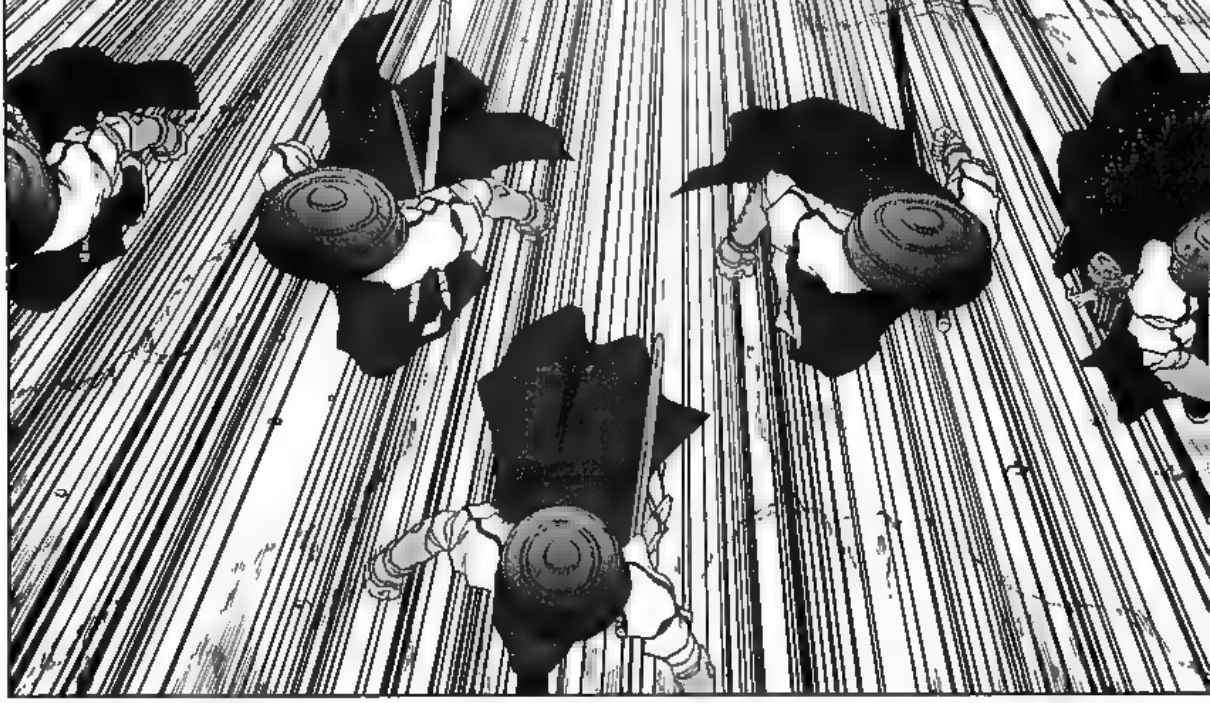
I WONDER... IF WE'LL GET PURSUED FROM HERE. WE PROBABLY WILL...

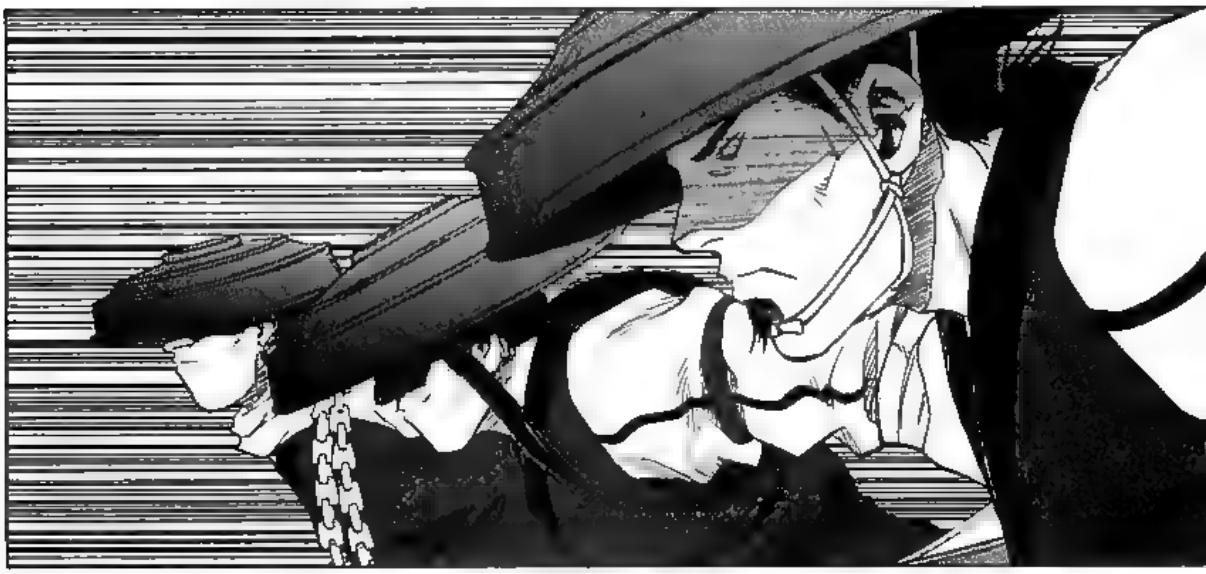
SOON THEY'LL FIND OUT THAT THE PRINCE'S BODY ISN'T WITHIN THE BURNED RUINS... FOLLOWING THAT, IT'S NOT GOING TO TAKE LONG FOR THOSE ASSASSINS TO FIND OUT WHAT HAPPENED...

THAT IS THE MUCH MORE SERIOUS ISSUE. IT'S NOT SOMETHING WE CAN JUST HIDE AND RUN AWAY FROM.
BUT THE REAL PROBLEM HERE AREN'T THE ASSASSINS... IT'S WHATEVER IS LIVING INSIDE THIS CHILD...


I HAVE TO FIND TANDA FIRST... HE'S OUR ONLY HOPE RIGHT NOW...



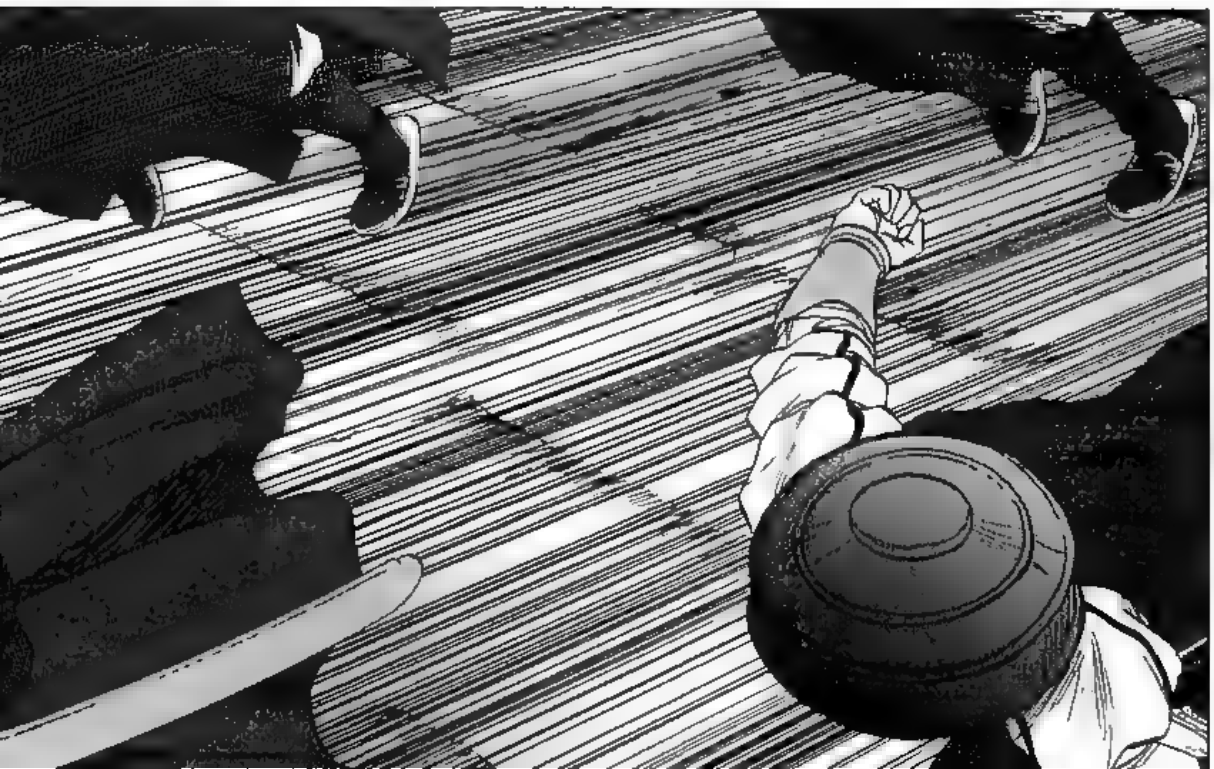


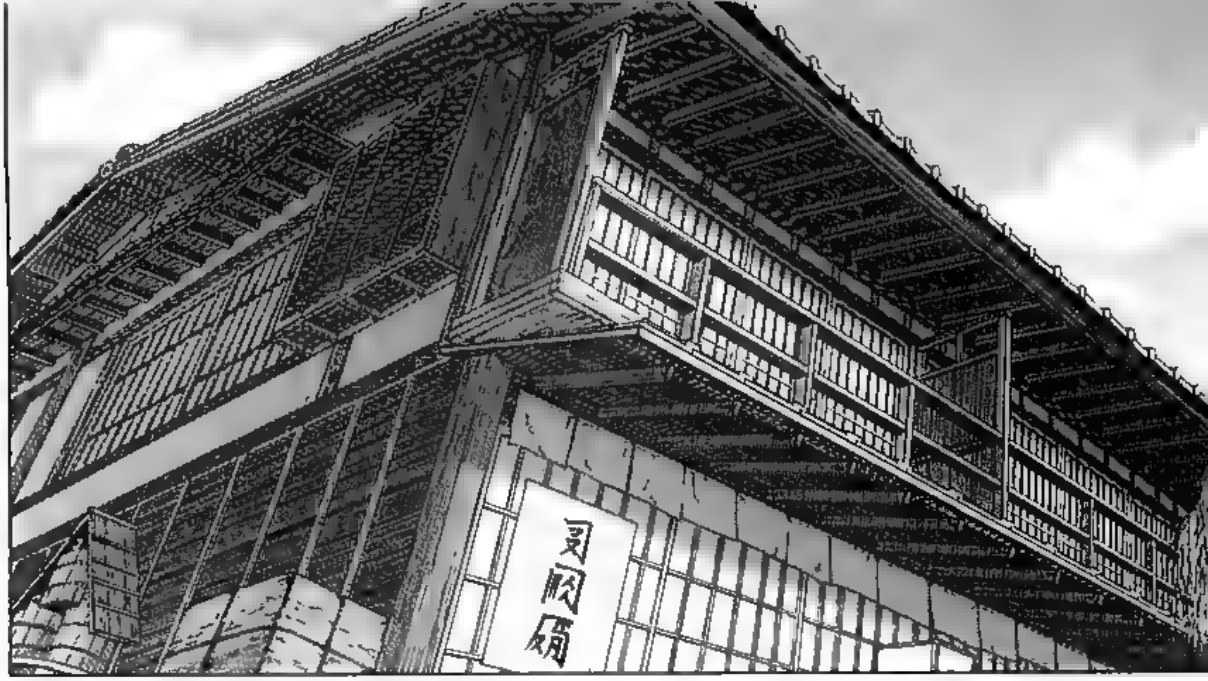


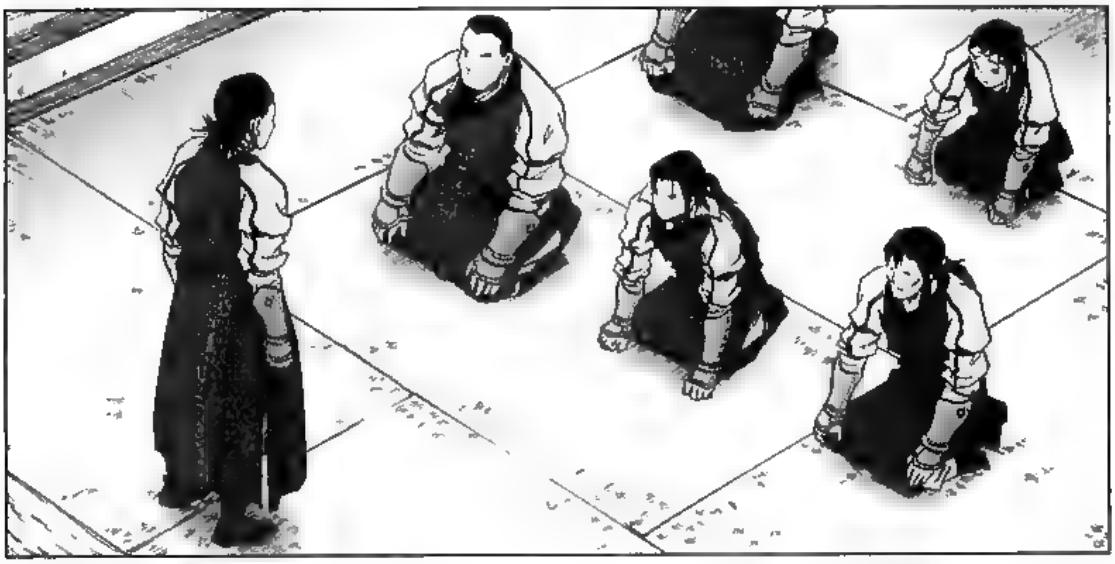
AH... THE DESCENDANTS OF THE 8 WARRIORS THAT ACCOMPANIED OUR FOUNDING FATHER EMPEROR TORGAL TO BANISH THE WATER SPIRIT 200 YEARS AGO!
HUNTERS...?

IT'S COMMON FOR HUNTERS TO SPEND THEIR WHOLE LIVES BEING IMPERIAL GUARDS, BUT THERE IS A LIGHT AND A DARKNESS THAT EXISTS...
ONLY THE YOUNGEST SON IN THE FAMILY CAN INHERIT THE ABILITIES OF A HUNTER AND RESPOND TO THE EMPEROR'S COMMANDS...

THIS WAS A CONCEPT CREATED BY THE STAR DIVINERS OF 200 YEARS AGO TO CONCEAL THE NATURE OF THE HUNTERS FROM THE PUBLIC
ON ONE HAND, THEY'RE CALLED THE "EMPEROR'S SHIELD," AND GUARD THE EMPEROR. ON THE OTHER HAND, THEY'RE ALSO CALLED THE "EMPEROR'S SHADOW," WHO SECRETLY DO THE WORK OF DARKNESS AS SHADOWS.







MERCHANTS IN THIS TOWN TEND TO BAND TOGETHER. THEY'RE PARTICULARLY DISTRUSTFUL. I HAD TO GAIN THEIR CONFIDENCE FIRST TO GET THEM TO TRUST ME.

IT LOOKS LIKE THIS BALSA HAS A GOOD REPUTATION AS A BODYGUARD.
CHIEF...

WE HAVE PEOPLE ALL OVER TOWN... I'VE ALREADY PLANTED MEN ON EVERY CORNER OF THE HIGHWAY.
SKILLFUL AND SMART, HUH...

THE ONLY THING THEY CAN DO IS TO TRAVERSE THE AOGIRI MOUNTAIN RANGE AT NIGHT WHEN THERE ARE NO PEOPLE...
IF THAT WOMAN MANAGED TO ESCAPE WITH THE PRINCE...

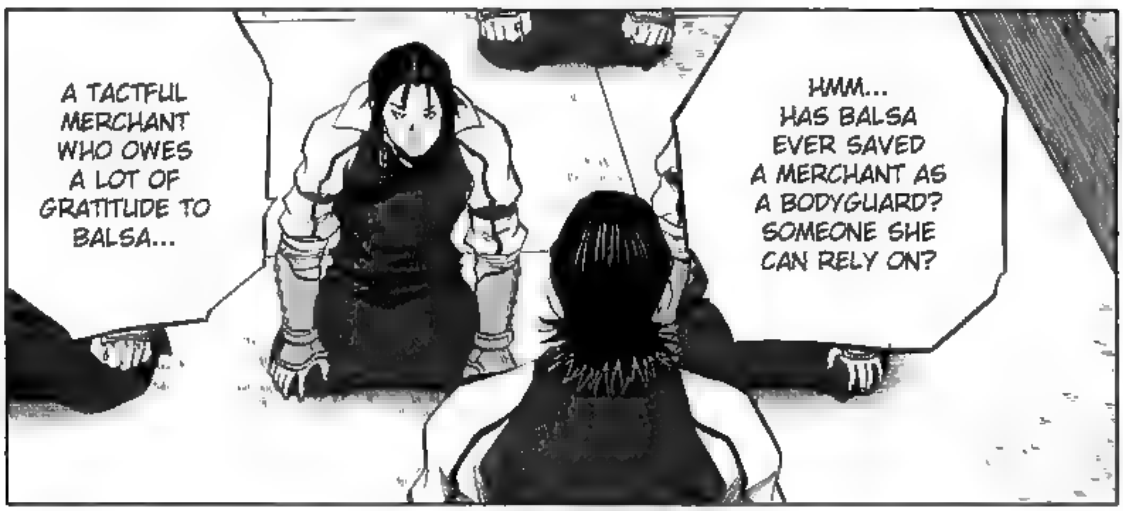
AND SHE CAN'T DO THAT HERSELF SINCE NO ONE KNOWS HER IN THIS TOWN, WHICH MEANS SHE'S UNTRUST-WORTHY.
...IF THAT HAPPENS, THE FIRST THING THEY HAVE TO DO IS TO BUY THE PROVISIONS THEY NEED TO GET THROUGH THE MOUNTAINS AS QUICKLY AS POSSIBLE.

SHE WOULD HAVE TO ASK FOR SOMEONE ELSE'S HELP.
SO WHAT WOULD SHE DO? JIN!

WE HAVE TO INVESTIGATE BALSA'S FRIENDS AND SEE IF THERE'S SOMEONE WHO HAD THE ABILITY TO DO HER SHOPPING FOR HER.
GOOD. I'D BET ON IT.

BUT THIS TOWN IS BIG... ...WE'RE GOING TO HAVE TO NARROW DOWN THE SEARCH AREAS...
AND CHECK OUT ANYONE WHO LOOKS LIKE THEY'VE BOUGHT GEAR FOR TREKKING.

RIGHT. WE NEED TO FIND THE MERCHANT WHO HELPED HER...
I HEARD THIS MORNING ABOUT SOMEONE WHO MIGHT HAVE HELPED BALSA. SEE IF WE CAN FIND OUT SOMETHING.


A TACTFUL MERCHANT WHO OWES A LOT OF GRATITUDE TO BALSA...
HMM... HAS BALSA EVER SAVED A MERCHANT AS A BODYGUARD? SOMEONE SHE CAN RELY ON?

I SAW TWO PEOPLE WHILE I WAS INVESTIGATING... BUT THEY DON'T LOOK LIKE THEY'D BE WORTH SAVING TO BALSA. I WOULDN'T TRUST THEM, IF IT WAS ME.
YUN!
WHAT DO YOU THINK, ZEN?
.....

I SEE... SHE'S NOT GOING TO BE GETTING ALL THAT IN ONE STORE.
IF SHE'S PLANNING TO CROSS THE MOUNTAINS, SHE WOULD NEED A SUPPLY OF FOOD, SOME FUR TO KEEP WARM AND OIL PAPER FOR THE RAIN.....

YES. BUT IT'S NOT EXACTLY HARD FOR HER TO GET A KID OR A SHOP-KEEPER TO HELP HER BUY ALL THOSE THINGS.

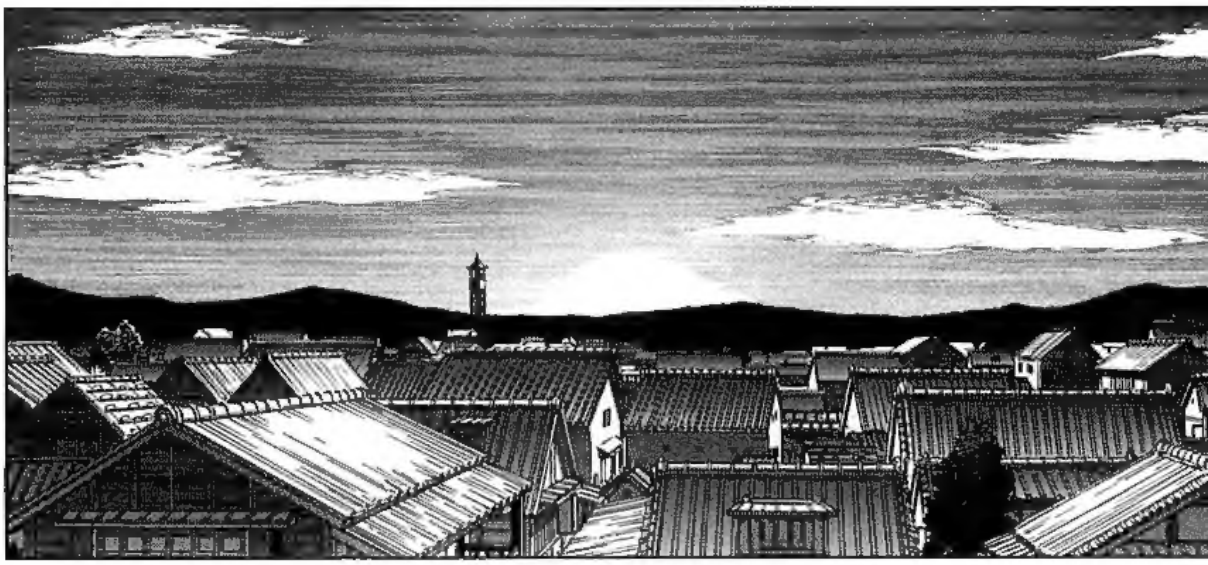
SEE... I DON'T THINK MERCHANTS ARE VERY SECRETIVE...
IS THERE SOMETHING ON YOUR MIND, CHIEF?
HMM...

IF SHE GOT THE HELP OF A SHOPKEEPER, WORD WILL INEVITABLY GET OUT. NO ONE WANTS TO ASSOCIATE WITH A FUGITIVE.
WHICH MEANS ...?

BUT IF SHE KNOWS HE'S BEING FOLLOWED, SHE PROBABLY DOESN'T KNOW WHERE THE PURSUERS ARE.
THE FACT THAT THE QUEEN ENTRUSTED THE PRINCE TO BALSA MEANS THAT SHE KNOWS WHAT WE'RE AFTER.

GO!!
THEN IT'S NOTHING BUT A RACE WITH TIME. GO TO ALL THE SHOPS THAT SELL ANYTHING THAT CAN BE USED TO CROSS A MOUNTAIN. SCOUR EACH AND EVERY ONE UNTIL THERE'S NOTHING LEFT.

DASH
DASH
DASH DASH



HM?

DAMN... THE SUN IS SETTING. I SHOULD CALL IT A DAY...
IT'S NOT THIS ONE EITHER ...

DRIED FOOD...
AHH, ARE YOU CLOSING ALREADY? CAN I STILL BUY SOME THINGS?
I'M GOING TO BE TRAVELLING THROUGH THE MOUNTAINS SOON, SO DO YOU HAPPEN TO HAVE SOME BEEF SHOULDER?
OF COURSE. WHAT DO YOU NEED?
OH? YOU MEAN A LOT OF PEOPLE BOUGHT BEEF RECENTLY?
I'M ALL OUT OF BEEF SHOULDERS. AND I DON'T USUALLY SELL THAT MUCH OF THEM...

THERE WAS ONLY ONE. IT WAS SOME ERRAND BOY...
SOME LABORER WHO'S ABOUT TO TREK THE MOUNTAIN AND WORK IN ANOTHER TOWN PROBABLY COMMISSIONED THE BOY.
!
AN ERRAND BOY...?!
THAT'S IT!!